Washington Merry-Go-Round

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Mobster's Murder Linked to JFK Death Plot

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with
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Washington — Perhaps the most feared mobster in the underworld is Florida's Mafia chieftain, Santos Trafficante. House investigators approached his Miami hideaway, therefore, with some apprehension.

He appeared at the screen door to accept their subpena. "Shove it under the door," he said softly. They peered through the screen. The sinister Trafficante was pale, and his hands were shaking.

He may have had reason to quake. The House Assassinations Committee had taken a sudden interest in the murder last July of mobster John Rosselli. Before he died, the flamboyant Rosselli hinted that he knew who had arranged John F. Kennedy's assasination. Carefully hedging, he told an incredible story that implicated Trafficante.

TWELVE DAYS before his death, Rosselli dined with Trafficante at the fashionable Landings Restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. It is the custom of the Mafia to wine and dine a wayward member before he is executed.

According to the New York Times, Rosselli was lured aboard a private boat by his executioners on July 28. Roselli settled down to a glass of vodka with two gangland associates. One unobtrusively slipped behind him and held a powerful hand over Rosselli's nose and mouth. The 70-year-old Rosselli, who had emphysema, was easily strangled. Then the murderers sawed off his legs so the body would fit in a metal drum.

They cut holes in the drum so it would fill with water. Before dumping the drum in Biscayne Bay, they weighted it down with heavy iron chains. Apparently the gases from his body caused the container to rise from its salt-water grave. The drum washed up on the shore, where it was found by fishermen. Obviously the unfortunate Rosselli had been the victim of a gangland execution. This raised some nagging questions in the minds of the committee's homicide experts.

WHY WOULD the Mafia knock off a retired racketeer? The fact that he had appeared before the Senate normally would have deterred the crime lords. They would rather not risk antagonizing the Federal Government by murdering a celebrated witness unless there were some compelling reason.

The experts doubted the Mafia was upset over Rosselli's confession that, as a hit man for the Central Intelligence Agency, he had attempted to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. The mobsters hated Castro, who had expropriated their casinos in Havana. So they should not have minded his CIA mission.

We furnished the committee with a more likely motive for the murder. We got the story from Rosselli himself, bit by bit, over the past six years.

The CIA, figuring that the Havana underworld must have killers who could eliminate Castro, spoke secretly to billionaire Howard Hughe's chief honcho in Las Vegas, Robert Maheu, who recruited Rosselli, then the Chicago mob's debonair representative in Las Vegas.

Rosselli lacked the stature to deal with Trafficante, who controlled the Havana underworld. Rosselli enlisted his own superior, Chicago godfather Sam Giancana, to approach Trafficante.

Giancana flew to Miami to make the arrangements. Then, with Trafficante's blessing, Rosselli used the Havana underworld to plot Castro's demise. The assassination squad tried to plant poison pills, supplied by the CIA, in Castro's food. Castro became ill but failed to die. Then underworld snipers were dispatched to a Havana rooftop. They were caught.

ROSSELLI TOLD US the rest of the story as his own "speculation." There is a good chance he was not merely speculating but had picked up information inside the mob. At least, here's his startling story:

Rosselli heard that Castro had tortured the would-be assassins and had learned about the plot on his life. It would be the sort of irony that Latin Americans appreciate, Rosselli suggested, for Castro to use the same plotters to retaliate against the U.S. President. According to Rosselli's speculation, Castro may have used these underworld elements, most of them Cubans from the old Trafficante organization, to arrange the assassination of Kennedy.

They may have lined up Lee Harvey Oswald as the assassin or may have used him as a decoy while others ambushed Kennedy from closer range. Once Oswald was captured, the mob couldn't afford to let him reveal his connection with the underworld. So Rosselli speculated that Jack Ruby, a small-time hoodlum with ties to the Havana underworld, was ordered to eliminate Oswald.

This sort of "speculation" might have induced the mob to silence John Rosselli.